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ABSTRACT

Research on the composition process and writing instruction has reiterated that red-pencilling students' literary efforts achieves mostly negative effects. Researchers contend that if teachers ignore the mechanics used (or misused) by beginning writers, if they encourage and stimulate the production of both oral and written language, reward the expression of ideas, and value fluency and creativity, then through reading others' words and generating their own, children will gradually recognize and use spelling rules, punctuation, and proper syntax. Most children arrive in first grade well equipped with the language necessary for composition, but few control transcribing--spelling and mechanical--rules. Two samples of writing exemplify this: one a perfectly spelled and punctuated two-word title, the other an extended, creative composition with several spelling and punctuation errors. The first indicates a fear of making errors, while the second indicates a willingness to take risks. Clearly, the second exemplifies an attitude that should be encouraged if the student is to become a proficient writer. Educators should be suspicious of first reactions to students' writing--reactions usually in response to error or "correctness." Educators must promote turning classrooms into supportive, safe places in which to learn, to practice, to err, and to take risks, in order to meet the needs of beginning writers. (Examples of beginning writers' compositions are appended.) (HTH)

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What Everyone Should Know (Has Known but Done Little to Implement) About Evaluating Students' Writing

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THE SOLDIER

A poem written suddenly
Outpouring onto paper
Scribbled down hurriedly
While thoughts are hot still
Becomes a soldier, defiant, free,
To fight my war, to fight for me.

An onslaught of words, defending me,
Goes forth like a brave trooper
From his home. And now,
Without author, stands alone.

But it returns, beaten, red marks like wounds
Slashing the innocent lines,
The struggle over.
The wounds are deep. They reach
To scar my soul which cries out:
"Understand!" The feeling, not the grammar,
Should be read! Now the soldier is dead.
The poem that he was lies crumpled
In a corner, the effort made in vain.

The enemy has won.

by Rencie Farwell
Grade 6

Frank, Marjorie. If You're Trying to Teach Kids How to Write, You've Gotta Have This Book. Incentive Publications, Inc., 1979.

This paper should not need to be written. Research on the composition process and writing instruction has, over the past thirty years, reiterated time and again that red-pencilling students' literary efforts achieves many negative and few positive effects. The brief bibliography presented here indicates the great interest in and variety of publications concerned with the teaching of writing at all grade levels. But even though writing as a topic in the 1980's is becoming like reading was in the 1960's in terms of federal, state, and local funding, few inroads are being made in actual classroom practices (Applebee, 1981).

As the director of the Texas Hill Country Writing Project, an in-service program for teachers K-12 wanting to improve classroom writing instruction, I am faced each year by these laments: "Through university classes, professional journals, and in-service workshops, I am introduced to innovative and effective ways of improving students' writing. However, I feel as though I am letting down the community, students, and school district by not preparing my classes to excel on standardized tests." Or, "I am unable to withstand administrative pressure to teach toward the test." Or, "My principal doesn't understand my intent. She/he thinks I lack standards because I don't mark every student paper and every mechanical error."

Similarly, I am told by administrators who sponsor teachers from their districts: "Please help the teachers prepare students for achievement tests; teach them how to evaluate, assess, and accept accountability."

The purpose of this paper is not to convince either group that the other is right. Both sides have the same goal--to improve students' knowledge. The conflict is a result of differing emphases and professional priorities and demands. For example, standardized testing is likely to be a

reality for some time in the educational arena and, as such, teachers are expected by district administrators to devote some parts of class time preparing students for test-success. Also, administrators are understandably concerned when some teaching and testing programs do not show evidence of immediate test score gains.

However, given the attention given to this topic and conflict, I am amazed that the question of successful procedures grows more rather than less frequent. At regional and local levels, the messages do not seem to be filtering down. The only solution I can propose is to reiterate frequently the "truisms" of exemplary teaching practices, to remind and re-educate those who may have forgotten or never learned effective teaching methods, to re-evaluate and update the relationship between research and practice, and to speak louder and clearer to those who may have attended but not heard our message.

Researchers concerned with learners' awareness and usage of writing conventions have been reporting findings and suggestions surprising to many educators. They contend if teachers ignore the mechanics used (or misused) by beginning writers, if they encourage and stimulate the production of both oral and written language, if they reward the expression of ideas and value fluency and creativity, then through hours of practice, both reading others' words and generating their own, children will naturally recognize and utilize spelling rules, punctuation marks, and proper syntax. (Beers, 1977; Elbow, 1973; Graves, 1978; Loban, 1976). In a review of research on the development of spelling awareness, Hayes and Plaskon conclude that teachers should "Encourage children to write freely and to experiment with the spelling of words they wish to utilize in their writing.... When writing, the child's spelling should be seen as developmental. The child should be

encouraged to take risks in spelling. Indeed, the only unacceptable response is not to try." (p. 77)

As educators, many of us feel uncomfortable with such an extreme position, (we do not feel teaching is taking place without direct intervention) but no administrator, curriculum supervisor, or teacher should be satisfied teaching and testing about writing--rules and regulations--instead of teaching and evaluating writing--putting words to paper first and then allowing students to "grow into," with help, standard prose.

Obviously, some parent/teacher orientation is necessary to prepare persons disturbed about student papers containing some "errors" not marked. Traditionally, teachers, parents, and students expect the language arts teacher to sternly maintain standards of correctness. This stereotype, as exemplified in the poem at the beginning of this discussion, is often held by English teachers themselves. But a shift in teacher roles is necessary and, in the long run, beneficial to each group affected.

James Moffett and Betty J. Wagner (1976) discriminate between composing skills and transcribing skills. The former refer to the expression of ideas whether through speech or writing; whereas, the latter skills include spelling, punctuation, and mechanics. Most children arrive in first grade well-equipped with the language necessary to compose, that is, communicate; fewer children are in control of transcription competencies. Furthermore, not all of our students are ready to begin mastery of spelling, punctuation, and standard syntax at the same time. Piagetian theory suggests that concrete operational competencies of conservation, reversability, and classification, etc., are necessary for children to grasp the concepts of left to right directionality in English writing, spaces in between words,

and punctuation to indicate sentences (Zutell). The paper below is a perfect example of a composition written by a child probably still operating in pre-operational stages; she has not yet grasped the concept of spaces between words--an abstract conservation task.

Mihrhas.

Tracy

Ihavapahas.

dyunhavapahs.

wayoоahas.

Ihavtuwpahas.

To illustrate an alternative to the traditional marking system, I would like to model a system by examining closely some first graders' "compositions."

Or Teehouse

Anne

My teehouse is fun.

My fammy pluaes in it.

I pluae in it.

I have fun wet. it.

The Climb

Sam

The brevity of Sam's "story" suggests I begin by analyzing his paper. With only a hint of irony, I can say that his composition is mechanically perfect. The first word of his title is capitalized, the irregular spelling of climb is correct, and the title is even-underlined. Although only Sam

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[1]All the names in this discussion have been changed to protect the children's privacy.

[2]Special thanks to C. Gersch, first grade teacher, Giddings Elementary School, for sharing her students' papers.

can verify my hunch, I suspect that like many students he is afraid of making a mistake. Even primary school children learn early to associate school with "right answers," corrections, and evaluation. The less they commit to paper, the fewer errors that can be marked by the teacher.

Anne's paper provides a dramatic contrast. Her composition consists of a title (two words, both spelling "wrong," non-underlined), five sentences (one punctuated correctly, but of 25 words, including the title, nine--over one-third--are misspelled). What should teachers do with Anne's paper? Should they 'correct' all of the errors with a contrasting ink color so that Anne can recognize her errors? Should the teacher conduct a special lesson on underlining titles? Should Anne write play ten times in her spelling book or practice saying tree, family, and with? I hope not or she might begin writing "perfect papers" like Sam.

Instead Anne should be encouraged to write more and more, and should be praised for knowing as much about written language as she does even though applications of her knowledge may not be perfect. Teachers need to recognize and praise the wealth of Anne's knowledge of language:

1. She recognizes the structure and function of a sentence. A written sentence is a complete thought with a subject and a verb.

2. She realizes that words maintain a certain spelling throughout a text. Teehouse is spelled the same all through her story as are plaues and fammy.

3. She utilizes subject/verb agreement rules. The third person singular verb ends in an s and is used following a collective noun.

4. She grasps the concept of sound/symbol relationships although she may not pronounce (or hear) words the same as you and I. But there is no doubt as to the words she is intending to use in her composition.

Overall, Anne's paper is charming, comprehensible and indicative of effective communication. Anne comes to the writing task well-equipped for continued language growth unless she learns instead to be more concerned with the inadequacies of her effort rather than its strengths. Her nine errors are less important than her overwhelming success.

The process used to analyze Anne's paper could be used to evaluate any composition. For example, other stories written by children in the same class representing the wide range and variation present among learners can be examined in the same way.

The tree house

John

its fun.
I like it.
Can we go in?
Yes you can.
Is it fun?
Yes it is.

The Fun house

Richard

The boy seys help help.
The man ran to the boy.
two boys ran too.
Mother ran too.

Both The tree house by John and The Fun house by Richard are sophisticated stories for having been written by first graders. Not only has John used almost perfect spelling and punctuation (its needs both a capital I and an apostrophe), but also, he has used questions and answers to enliven his story, has recognized that writing can represent different voices, and has some notion of a beginning/middle/and end. Likewise, Richard has developed a story line; more than simply a description of a fun house, Richard employs dialogue and implies a sequence of events. These stories represent laudable accomplishments for both young writers.

Finally, I would like to share Sara's writing. Her improvement from first to second papers is phenomenal. As you analyze them, notice Sara's attempts at dialogue. She practices using quotation marks and varies her 9 sentence structure. Both her spelling and her fluency have improved from A Trehouse story to My Trip.

A Trehouse

Sara

The trehouse is red.
I work to build.
Min brushes work to.
To build.
And paint to.

My Trip

Sara

I go to the park
again. Said suzy "I like
the many boys and girls.
It is time to go home for you
said ted
Soon it will be many days.
Soon it will be first.

In conclusion, educators must become suspicious of first reactions to students' writing--reactions usually in response to error or "correctness." Of course, over time, students must be aided in mastering spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics. But before making judgments that could discourage students from pursuing excellence in written expression, language arts teachers must encourage and reward long-term, life-long habits and proficiencies in written communication. Schools need to evaluate not only the products but also the processes learners go through, the kinds of assignments teachers give, the conditions under which writers are required to compose. Most of all, educational leaders must promote turning classrooms into supportive, safe places in which to learn, to practice, to err, and to take risks. Only then will we meet the needs of all our students--the Sams and the Saras.

Finally, everyone must recognize that in following the above procedures, the role of the teacher changes. The classroom teacher becomes a facilitator, resource, mentor, encourager rather than an arbitor of correctness, a gatekeeper of knowledge, a grader and assigner of value--a judge, jury, and prosecutor. That shift requires understanding and encouragement for teachers from administrative levels. Parents, teachers, and administrators must support the teacher stressing fluency and experimentation and be wary of the one overly concerned with teaching toward a standardized test. The former teacher is the one in tune with the expectations and professional goals of language arts instruction today.

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APPENDIX I

Facsimiles of the original stories used in the text of this manuscript (in order of appearance.)

Nkthrpas.
Inarapahas.
Jyunharapahs.
Krayopahas.
Inartarpahas.

or Teehouse

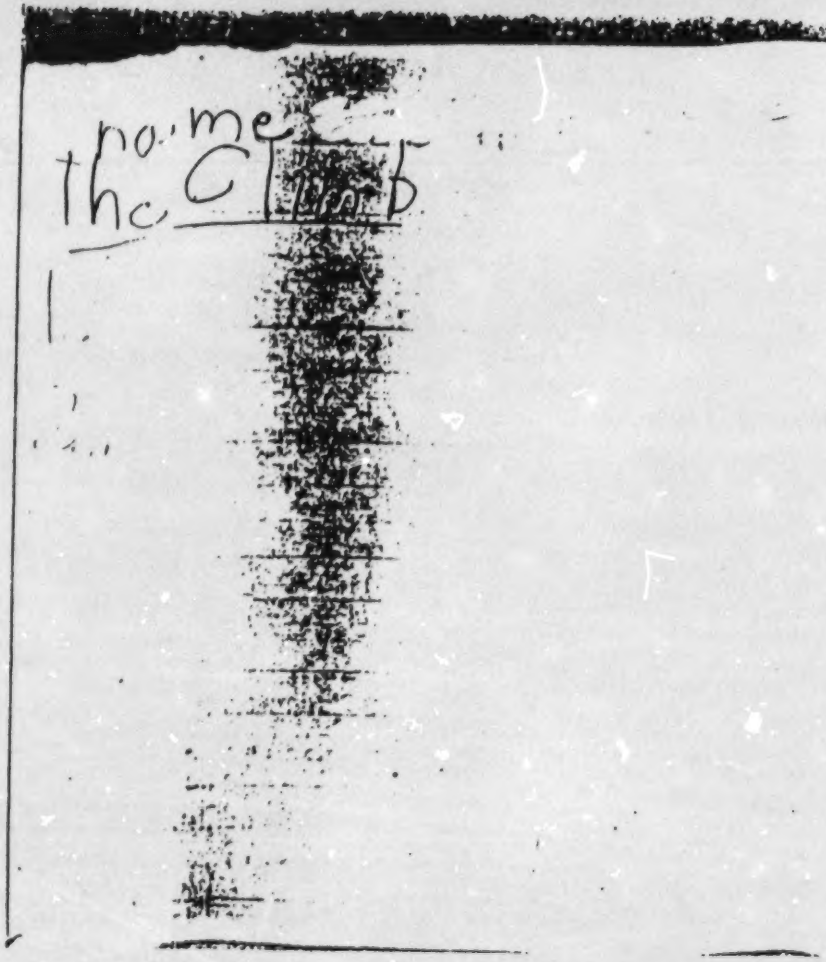
1 My teehouse is fun.

2 My Fammy pluaes in it.

3 I plue in it.

4 My Fammy pluaes in it.

I have fun wetir


name
the C

The [redacted] house

its fun

I like

Can we go in?

yes you can.

Is it fun?

yes it is.

The Fun house

The boy seys help help.
The man ran to the boy.
two boys ran too.
Mothr ran too.

A Tre house

The tre house is red.
I work to build.
Min bbushs work to.
To build.

My Trip

I go to the park.

again said s.

(Said Suzy) "I like the

many boys and girls.

It is time to go
home. for you said ted
soon it will be
many days. soon it
will be first.